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THE SOURCES OF BEN JONSON'S VOLPONE.

WILLIAM GIFFORD, in his edition of Ben Jonson's works in 1816, pointed out similarities between certain portions of *Volpone* and passages in Petronius Arbiter.¹ Following up this suggestion, F. Holthausen² seeks to show "dass der englische dichter die idee und mehrere episoden seines dramas dem satirischen schelmenroman des alten Römers verdankt." Koeppe³ likewise refers the plot of *Volpone* to the *Satyricon* of Petronius. No one, so far as I can learn, has suggested any other possible source.

But those who have assigned the source of *Volpone* to the *Satyricon* have overlooked, it seems to me, another version of the same story, presenting the same plot, and closer in its details to the English play. This story is found in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, Nos. V-IX (and, as a supplement to No. VIII, No. XI).⁴ It may be easily seen that, though different names are employed, the dialogues all refer to the same character, and in the order in which the author has placed them, they tell a complete story. This story is as follows:

A wealthy, childless old man is besieged by legacy-hunters. To increase his already large fortune, he slyly urges them on in their gifts: (1) by pretending to be older than he really is; (2) by coughing a great deal, and, whenever one of the suitors comes into his presence, seeming to be just ready to embark on Charon's boat; and (3) by declaring to each in succession that he has just made the will in his favor. Three suitors, in particular, are brought out and mentioned by name. One wears himself to death with sheer anxiety; the second tries to bribe the old man's faithful servant to administer poison, and so hasten matters; the

¹ See *Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. CUNNINGHAM (3 vols., London, 1897), Vol. I, p. 338, n. 3; p. 342, n. 3.

² In an article, "Die Quelle von Ben Jonson's *Volpone*," *Anglia*, Vol. XII, pp. 519-25.

³ In his *Quellen-Studien zu den Dramen Ben Jonson's, John Marston's, und Beaumont's und Fletcher's*.

⁴ Between the first edition of LUCIAN in 1475 and the writing of *Volpone* there appeared no less than seventy-five editions, in whole or in part, of the Greek satirist.

third thinks it a fine stroke of policy to register in public his will, in which he makes the old man his heir, hoping that the old gentleman, moved by such a mark of affection, would emulate his example and do the same. Each in the end is brought to distress. Finally, when the old man himself comes to die, he has the laugh on all his plotting suitors by making a true will, leaving all his property to a favorite young slave, who at once rides out and is received by the authorities as "more nobly born than Kodrus, handsomer than Nireus, and more prudent than Odysseus."

The incident in Petronius occupies but a few paragraphs in a long narrative of amorous adventures. As Professor Holthausen points out, it could have suggested in a general way the plot of *Volpone*. But there are no close resemblances of phrase or thought, no "hallmarks," so to speak, which show clearly that Jonson had this particular narrative in view rather than any other presenting the same story.

On the other hand, the account in Lucian could just as easily have supplied the plot; and I shall try to show reasonable evidence that it did.

Jonson was thoroughly familiar with Lucian, and he frequently went to him for material. In *Cynthia's Revels* he refers to him by name:¹ Act I, scene 1, of the same play is borrowed with slight change from the *Dialogues of the Gods*;² the purging of the playwright in the *Poetaster* comes from *Lexiphanes*; *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon* takes material freely from the dialogue *Icara-Menippus*;³ and there is more or less decided borrowing in other of Jonson's works.⁴

Moreover, in writing *Volpone* itself, Jonson (who seems to have

¹ *Cri.* That's to be argued, Amorphus, if we may credit Lucian, who, in his *Encomio Demosthensis*, affirms he never drunk but water in any of his compositions.

Amo. Lucian is absurd; he knew nothing: I will believe mine own travels before all the Lucians of Europe. He doth feed you with fittons, figments and leasings.

Cri. Indeed, I think, next a traveller, he does prettily well.

² *Dialogues*, Nos. VII and XXIV.

³ Jonson's indebtedness to Lucian in this masque has not been pointed out, so far as I know.

⁴ Most of these borrowings have been noted by Upton or Whalley.

written the play in a hurry¹) goes straight to Lucian for material. The masque presented by Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno in Act I, scene 1, is taken wholly from Lucian's *Dream*; the monologue of the parasite, Act III, scene 1, the reader of Lucian will at once recognize as inspired by the dialogue *Parasitism as an Art*;² two proverbial sayings are taken from the Greek writer; and the remarks on gold, Act V, scene 1, are taken with little change from the *Dream*.³

Mosca: Why, your gold
Is such another med'cine, it dries up
All those offensive savours: it transforms
The most deformed, and restores them lovely,
As 'twere the strange poetical girdle. Jove
Could not invent t'himself a shroud more subtle
To pass Acrisius' guards

Lucian, in the *Dream*, speaking of gold, says:

You see what a world of good gold accomplishes, since, like the famous girdle the poets sing about, it transforms the ugly and makes them attractive. . . . Whereas the father of all men and gods, when in his youth he fell in love with that famous maiden of Argolis, having nothing more lovely into which he might transform himself, nor knowing how he could corrupt the watch set by Acrisius—of course you've heard how he turned into gold.⁴

With such facts before us we are prepared to believe that Jonson got from Lucian as well the plot of the story.

The old man of Petronius, vagabond, philosopher, poet, with a mania for spouting bad verse, must undergo quite a transformation to become Volpone. Holthausen admits this when he says of Volpone: “. . . nur ist er nicht ein zufällig in die stadt verschlagener pechvogel, wie der dichter des Petronius, sondern ein bereits begüterter, eingesessener ‘magnifico.’” But the old man of Lucian and the old man of Jonson are quite alike, and

¹ See the Prologue:

“ . . . but this his creature,
Which was two months since no feature;
And though he dares give them five lives to mend it,
’Tis known, five weeks fully penned it,
From his own hand, without a coadjutor,
Novice, journeyman or tutor.”

² Noted by UPTON in his *Remarks*, 1749.

³ Pointed out by Whalley.

⁴ The translation here used is that by W. D. SHELDON, *A Second Century Satirist; or, Dialogues and Stories from Lucian* (Philadelphia, 1901).

little change is necessary in worldly position, or mental or moral characteristics. Even in the physical description of the two there is a resemblance. The old man in *Dialogue VI* is described: "his nose stuffed with phlegm and his eyes with rheum;" and in *Dialogue IX*: "blear-eyed, into the bargain, and my nose stuffed with phlegm." Such disagreeable descriptions naturally stick in one's mind; accordingly, we find Volpone described by Jonson with similar phrases. Mosca says:

And from his brain
Flows a cold sweat, with a continual rheum
Forth the resolved corners of his eyes.

And again, pretending that Volpone is deaf, he shouts into his ear:

Would you once close
Those filthy eyes of yours, that flow with slime,
Like two frog pits

Corvino: His nose is like a common sewer, still running.

At the opening of the play Volpone indulges in a monologue which is intended to possess the audience with the exact state of affairs. For the purpose of comparing this with the state of affairs in Lucian, I quote the monologue in sections, inserting after each section the corresponding passage in the *Dialogues of the Dead*.¹

I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,
To give my substance to; but whom I make
Must be my heir; and this makes men observe me:
This draws new clients daily to my house,
Women and men, of every sex and age,

Dialogue V: "You know that old man, I mean the very aged and infirm fellow, the rich Eukrates, who has no children, but fifty thousand legacy-hunters."

That bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels,

Dialogue IX: ". . . all sorts of presents were brought to me from every corner of the earth, the most beautiful conceivable."

With hope that when I die (which they expect
Each greedy minute)

Dialogue VI: One of the suitors describes the old man as "always seeming to be just at the last gasp;" and again, "I, imagining him to be

¹ The translation of the dialogues is that by HOWARD WILLIAMS, *Dialogues of Lucian*, translated (London, 1888).

almost at the next moment ready to embark upon his bier, would send him a number of things"

it shall then return

Ten-fold upon them; whilst some, covetous
Above the rest, seek to engross me whole,
And counter-work, the one unto the other,

Dialogue VI: ". . . you the whole time were plotting against him and expecting his legacy." *V*: "And when he is ill, their designs are very evident to all."

Contend in gifts, as they would seem in love:

Dialogue IX: POLYSTRATUS [the old man]: No, but I had ten thousand lovers. SIMYLUS (holding his sides): I couldn't help laughing. *You* lovers, at your age, with four teeth in your head!

All which I suffer, playing with their hopes,
And am content to coin them into profit,
And look upon their kindness, and take more,
And look on that; still bearing them in hand,
Letting the cherry knock against their lips,
And draw it by their mouths, and back again.

Dialogue V: "But he, indeed, charmingly cheats and buoys them up with vain hopes exceedingly."

Mosca enters, bringing in the masque, which, as we have observed, is taken from Lucian's *Dream*. Then Voltore, the first suitor, knocks. Volpone at once pretends sickness.

Volpone: Loving Mosca!

'Tis well: my pillow now and let him enter.

[*Exit MOSCA.*]

Now, my feign'd cough, my phtisic, and my gout,
My apoplexy, palsy, and catarrhs,
Help, with your forced functions, this my posture,
Wherein, this three year, I have milked their hopes.
He comes; I hear him—Uh! [*coughing*] Uh! Uh! Uh! O—

Re-enter MOSCA, introducing VOLTORE with a piece of Plate.

With this compare the following from Lucian:

True, yet how many things of mine Thukrites devoured, while always seeming to be just at the last gasp, and (whenever I came into the house) groaning and croaking, in a manner in the very depths of his chest, for all the world like some unformed chicken from an egg: so that I, imagining him to be almost at the next moment ready to embark upon his bier, would send him a number of things, that my rivals in affection might not surpass me in the magnitude of their gifts.

The plate having been presented, Voltore says:

Voltore: I'm sorry,
To see you still thus weak.

Mosca [*aside*]: That he's not weaker.

Volpone: You are too munificent.

Voltore: No, sir; would to heaven,

I could as well give health to you, as that plate!

Dialogue V: ". . . and, when he is ill, their designs are very evident to all: but, all the same, they engage to offer a sacrifice if he should get better."

The suitors come one by one, and Mosca declares to each in succession that the will had just been made in his favor.

Mosca: You are his heir, sir.

Voltore: Am I? . . . But am I sole heir?

Mosca: Without a partner, sir: confirmed this morning:

The wax is warm yet, and the ink scarce dry
Upon the parchment.

Voltore: Happy, happy me!

Dialogue IX: "In public I was accustomed to declare that I had left each of them my heir; and he believed it and equipped himself with more wheedling flattery than ever."

Next come two incidents, not even hinted at in Petronius, but in Lucian constituting each a dialogue.

The first is the poison incident. In *Dialogue VII* one of the suitors, impatient at the old man's prolonged life, tries to bribe the faithful servant to administer poison and thus hasten matters. The servant appears to assent, but by skilfully changing cups poisons the suitor instead.

Corbaccio tries to persuade Mosca to give the old man a drug.

Corb: Why? I myself

Stood by while it was made, saw all the ingredients:

And know it cannot but most gently work:

My life for his, 'tis but to make him sleep.

Volp. [*aside*]: Ay, his last sleep, if he would take it.

Again, in III, 5, Corbaccio says to Mosca:

Could'st thou not give him a dram?

And in the last act, Mosca, accusing Corbaccio, says:

. . . and would have hired
Me to the poisoning of my patron, sir.

The second is the will incident. In *Dialogue VIII* the suitor Knemon says:

I was in the habit of courting and flattering Hermolaus, the millionaire, who was childless, in the expectation of his dying before me; and he admitted my courtship with no unpleasurable feeling. It appeared to me, in fact, to be a clever device, that of registering my will in public, in which I have left him all my wealth, so that he might emulate my example and do the same.

The sudden fall of the roof on his head, however, carried him off to Hades, where he is lamenting that his property had been snatched from those whom he really intended to have it. Again, in *Dialogue XI* the same theme is developed. Two very old men, each of whom expected to outlive the other, are the characters.

They used to court and wheedle one the other for the sake of the expected legacy (being of the same age), and publicly registered their wills; Moerichus, if he should die first, leaving Aristetas master of all his property, and Aristetas Moerichus, should he predecease the other.

Corbaccio and Volpone are supposed to be about the same age; Mosca refers to them as "two old rotten sepulchres;" but Corbaccio, of course, believes that he will outlast Volpone.

Corb: Excellent! Excellent! sure I shall outlast him.

With Corbaccio in this frame of mind, Mosca says to him, I, 1:

Mosca: Now would I counsel you, make home with speed;
There, frame a will; whereto you shall inscribe
My master your sole heir.

Corb: And disinherit
My son!

Mosca: O, sir, the better: for that colour
Shall make it much more taking.

Corb: O, but colour?

Mosca: This will, sir, you shall send it unto me.
Now, when I come to inforce, as I will do,
Your cares, your watchings, and your many prayers,
Your more than many gifts, your this day's present,
And last, produce your Will; where, without thought
Or least regard unto your proper issue,
A son so brave, and highly meriting,
The stream of your diverted love hath thrown you
Upon my master, and made him your heir:
He cannot be so stupid, or stone-dead,
But out of conscience, and mere gratitude—

Corb: He must pronounce me his?

In connection with this will incident there is an interesting parallelism of metaphor. Knemon, in Hades, is complaining to a friend and says:

Now Hermolaus [the old man] holds my property like some sea-wolf, and *has snatched away the hook with the bait.*¹

When Corbaccio hurries out to do Mosca's bidding, the parasite turns to Volpone and says:

Contain
Your flux of laughter, sir: you know this hope
Is *such a bait, it covers any hook.*

In *Dialogue V* Pluto says to Hermes, in regard to the old man:

Let him live on, Hermes; to the ninety years he has already reached dealing out so many more again, and, if, at least, it were possible, even yet more. But as for those fawning flatterers . . .

And in *Dialogue VI* Pluto says:

Well done, Thukrites; may you live to the longest possible period, at once rich and having the laugh against such gentlemen.

Mosca expresses the very same wish:

Mosca: And that when I am lost in blended dust,
And hundreds such as I am, in succession—
Volp.: Nay, that were too much, Mosca.
Mosca: You shall live,
Still to delude these harpies.

Volpone's idea of making out a true will in favor of his parasite, Mosca, in order to have the laugh on all his fawning suitors, was doubtless suggested by *Dialogue IX*. The old man, in Hades, is talking to a friend:

Polystратus: . . . but all the time, I held in my possession the other my real will, and left it behind me, with an injunction to one and all of them to go to the devil.

Simylus: And whom did your last will contain as your heir? Some one of your own family, I presume?

Polystратus: By heaven, no, but a certain recently-purchased handsome boy, a Phrygian.

The further scheme of having Mosca, already publicly declared the heir, go forth through the streets in Volpone's habit of a *clarissimo*, splendid in his newly acquired wealth, was possibly sug-

¹ καὶ νῦν Ἑρμόλαος ἔχει τὰμὰ ὥσπερ τις λάβραξ καὶ τὸ ἀγκίστρον τῷ δελέατι συγκατασπᾶσας.

gested by two passages in the *Dream*, from which, as we have pointed out, Jonson was borrowing. Micyllus, the cobbler, having dreamed that he was suddenly left the sole heir to a certain rich old man, is relating his dream:

When I rode out in a carriage, with a span of white horses, with my head proudly thrown back, the cynosure of all eyes, and the object of their envy. A crowd ran ahead or led the way on horseback and more lagged on behind. Clad in the old gentleman's clothing, and wearing some sixteen massive rings upon my fingers

So likewise, in the same piece, Simon the beggar, suddenly left heir to a rich childless old man:

rides out dressed in purple and scarlet, and has servants and carriages and golden beakers and tables with ivory feet, and receives the homage of all. . . . To crown all, the ladies are in love with him already, whereas he gives himself airs in their presence. . . .

In *Dialogue IX* the recently purchased slave, left as heir, is thus spoken of by Polystratus:

But, however, he was much more worthy to be my heir than they, even though he was a foreigner and a plague: whom even the great people themselves are already courting. He, then, was my heir, and now he is received among the nobles of the land (shaved though his chin was, and though he did not know a word of Greek), and is proclaimed to be more nobly born than Kodrus, handsomer than Nireus, and more prudent than Odysseus.

Mosca is similarly received by the avocatori at the trial,

4 *Avoc.*: We have done ill, by a public officer
To send for him, if he be heir.

3 *Avoc.*: 'Tis true
He is a man of great estate, now left.

4 *Avoc.*: Go you, and learn his name, and say the court
Entreats his presence here, but to the clearing
Of some few doubts. [Exit Notary.

* * * * *

4 *Avoc.*: Here come's the gentleman; make him way.

Enter MOSCA.

3 *Avoc.*: A stool.

4 *Avoc.*: A proper man; and were Volpone dead
A fit match for my daughter. [*Aside.*

3 *Avoc.*: Give him way.

To Petronius Holthausen assigns the source of the incident of

Corvino's offering his beautiful and chaste wife, Celia, for the healing of Volpone. Tho following is the passage in Petronius:¹

Matrona inter primas honesta, Philomela nomine, quae multas saepe hereditates officio aetatis extorserat, tum anus et floris extincti, filium filiamque ingerebat orbis senibus, et per hanc successionem artem suam perseverabat extendere. ea ergo ad Eumolpum venit et commendare liberos suos eius prudentiae bonitatisque . . . credere se et vota sua. illum esse solum in toto orbe terrarum, qui praeceptis etiam salubribus instruere juvenes quotidie posset. ad summum, relinquere se pueros in domo Eumolpi, ut illum loquentem audirent . . . quae sola posset hereditas juvenibus dari. nec aliter fecit ac dixerat, filiamque speciosissimam cum fratre ephebo in cubiculo reliquit simulavitque se in templum ire ad vota nuncupanda. Eumolpus, qui tam frugi erat ut illi etiam ego puer viderer, non distulit puellam invitare ad pigiciaca sacra. sed et prodagricum se esse lumborumque soluturum omnibus dixerat, et si non servasset integram simulationem, periclitabatur totam paene tragoediam evertere. . . .

According to Holthausen, Philomela is changed to the merchant Corvino, and the children to Celia.

Upton, it seems to me, pointed out the real source of this incident in his *Remarks*, 1749. He refers it to the *Satires* of Horace, II, 5. Horace, we hardly need say, was Jonson's favorite author; a glance at the notes collected by Gifford will show how frequently in this very play the dramatist went to the *Satires*. Moreover, this particular satire (II, 5) treats the same theme that *Volpone* does, and hence would naturally come to Jonson's mind. Ulysses visits Tiresias to ask how he may recuperate his lost fortune. Tiresias advises him to find some rich old man who has no children and make diligent suit to him by sending him presents, etc., very much as in Lucian. And then:

Tiresias: . . . scortator erit? cave te roget: ultro
Penelopen facilis potiori trade.

Ulysses: . . . Putasne,
Perduci, poterit tam frugi tamque pudica,
Quam nequiere proci recto depellere cursu?

To this as the suggestion add (as Holthausen) the account of the aged King David in 1 Kings 1:1-5, and we have a simple explanation of the source.

¹*Petronii Satiriae et liber Priapeorum*, FRANCISCUS BUECHELER (Berolini, 1882), p. 106; 140.

Holthausen also thinks that the name Corvino was probably suggested to Jonson by the picture in Petronius of Crotona, represented as

oppidum tanquam in pestilentia campos, in quibus nihil aliud est nisi cadavera, quae lacerantur, aut *corvi* qui lacerant.

But this same satire of Horace's could as readily have suggested the name:

plerumque recoctus
Scriba ex quinqueviro *corvum* deludet hiantem.

The reference, of course, is to the well-known fable of "The Crow and the Fox;" and that Jonson really had this fable in mind is shown by several passages.

Volpone: Methinks

Yet, you, that are so traded in the world,
A witty merchant, the fine bird, Corvino,
That have such moral emblems on your name,
Should not have sung your shame, and dropt your cheese,
To let the Fox laugh at your emptiness.

From this satire may have come also the suggestion of making one of Volpone's suitors a lawyer, who defends his case in court.

Magna minorve foro si res certabitur olim;
Vivet uter locuples sine gnatis, improbus ultro
Qui meliorem audax vocet in jus, illius esto
Defensor: fama civem causaque priorem
Sperne, domi si gnatus erit, foecundave conjux.
Quinte, puta, aut Publi, (gaudent prænominē molles
Auriculæ,) tibi me virtus tua fecit amicum:
Jus anceps novi; causas defendere possum:
Eripiet quivis oculos citius mihi, quam te
Contemtum quassa nuce pauperet

But when we begin to trace classical borrowings in Jonson, we must set a limit; and the limit of this paper has been reached. It was my purpose merely to point out one of the sources of *Volpone* that heretofore has been overlooked by students of Ben Jonson.

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